Voters can stop fraud in elections

BY KEN BENNETT
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Free and fair elections are at the heart of our representative democracy.

So, upon taking office as Arizona secretary of state last year, I was alarmed to hear allegations of pervasive and long-standing voter fraud in the border town of San Luis, Ariz., I had to see for myself.

On March 9, I and two of my top aides – Assistant Secretary of State Jim Drake and state Election Director Amy Bjelland – traveled to San Luis to observe the municipal election there.

I was encouraged to see a community with great political passion, as evidenced by the large numbers of people who lined the streets while voters streamed to the polls.

But during the course of that day, we also received new information corroborating years-old allegations that individuals associated with local political campaigns have frequently requested – even demanded, in some cases – the early ballots of San Luis citizens.

Once rounded up, these ballots – some filled out, some blank – have been at the mercy of these groups.

The result, I fear, is apparent in the numbers from the March 9 election. Of the 1,477 early ballots cast in San Luis that day, 143 were rejected because their signatures did not match those of the appropriate registered voter. In other words, whoever had signed the ballot envelope did not appear to be the same person who had requested it from the Yuma County Recorder's Office.

I want to stress that my office has seen no evidence that voter fraud swung any of the San Luis races that day. Local elections officials identified potentially fraudulent ballots and kept them out of the vote total.

But the rate of early ballots rejected due to non-matching signatures – nearly 10 percent – is a magnitude larger than what is typically seen elsewhere in Arizona and should act as a waving red flag for those concerned about the integrity of elections in San Luis.

For example: In the May 2008 municipal election for the town of El Mirage, just 18 early ballots out of 1,578 cast were rejected due to bad signatures. That's an error rate of just over 1 percent. In March of this year, elections in all of Maricopa County (excluding El Mirage and Guadalupe) saw voters cast 155,605 early ballots. Of those, just 46 were tossed due to non-matching signatures – a rejection rate of .03 percent.

Clearly, something is amiss in San Luis. The numbers alone led me in recent days to send a letter to Yuma County Attorney Jon R. Smith in which I shared the findings of my office and asked that he open an inquiry into the voting irregularities. I'm confident he'll do all he can. But the responsibility to safeguard local elections does not only rest with law enforcement and other authorities.

Ultimately, voters themselves can be the most effective line of defense against fraud and corruption. My message is simple: If you request and receive an early ballot, fill it out and drop the prepaid envelope in the mail or cast it in person at a designated early voting location.

No government entity can ensure the security of your ballot if you choose to hand it over to a candidate, campaign or any other group in advance of the election. Why take that risk?

Your vote is your voice. On Tuesday and in future elections, make sure it is heard the way you intend.

Ken Bennett is Arizona secretary of state.